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Indispensables

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INDISPENSABLES

INGRID SAT ON THE FLOOR while behind her, on the couch, David backcombed her dark wiry hair with his fingers. He plucked out a white strand and handed it to Ingrid who had begun a collection on the black lacquered coffee table.

Apes grooming each other, thought Ingrid. "My god," she said, pushing at the little pile of hairs. "It looks like an old woman died here." She caught herself too late then realized it didn't matter. She'd been censoring this sort of off-hand comment, along with the gloomy talk shows and movies on cable, for months; tonight, though, she wasn't at her father's.

"Don't we have a flair for the melodramatic," said David, yanking out another hair.

"That hurt."

David leaned over, positioning his face beside hers. "You only hurt the one you love," he sang close to her ear. David was always funnier and more affectionate when his lover, Lewis, was out of town. She pushed his head away and stomped her foot against the plush white carpeting. No one but Lewis could get away with white carpeting in Montana. She liked him but was glad he wasn't around tonight. He reminded her of the decorators she had worked with in Los Angeles: startling, handsome and poised, immaculately groomed with expensive, exacting taste in everything. She hated to even think how she registered on that kind of radar. What could such a man possibly want from her?

"I'm twenty-nine and my skin still breaks out; it's not fair that I have grey hair too."

"Have Lewis give you a rinse."

Although Lewis was Ingrid's Missoula hairstylist, she'd never allow him to pluck her grey hairs or even let David do it with him in the room. But Lewis had accompanied his mother to yet another of her body building competitions, this one in Las Vegas. Earlier David had half-jokingly suggested fixing up Lewis' mom with Ingrid's father as the solution to everyone's problems.

"Then Lewis would stay home with me, where he belongs,

and you could stop worrying about your dad.” The idea of her father with a forty-nine-year-old competitive body builder, or any woman besides her mother, seemed preposterous to Ingrid. “Hey, I was only kidding,” David said, punching Ingrid’s shoulder after an awkward silence.

“I know. I was just trying to imagine my dad and Vera.” Lewis had a photo of his mother taped to his mirror at the salon: Vera tanned and oiled, her muscley breasts straining against a bikini top as she hoisted a trophy over her mane of highlighted hair. She had begun working out six years ago following her husband’s fatal heart attack at the rodeo. Ingrid’s father hadn’t attempted anything quite so dramatic in his grief. So far he seemed content to immerse himself in an endless series of trivia books.

David raked his hands over Ingrid’s scalp and began massaging her neck.

“Were you grey before your mother got sick?”

“A little, but it definitely got worse once I moved up here.” David worked his hands down the length of her neck and began kneading her shoulders.

“Lewis once knew a man who went to sleep with a head of dark hair and woke up with white hair—we’re talking Andy Warhol—the night after he accidentally ran over and killed his baby daughter.”

“Gee, David, you really know how to soothe a girl.”

“Sorry.”

“I’ll consider forgiving you if you keep working on my shoulders.” It had been months since a man, or anyone, had touched her like this. Brad, her old boyfriend in Los Angeles, used to give her back rubs and after she moved to Montana they’d tried to keep things going, but even over the phone Ingrid found herself full of anger she was ashamed to express. During their conversations she imagined him puttering around his white-tiled kitchen with the cordless to his ear, consulting the calendar, mapping out days and weeks, considering no one but himself.

David broke the spell by gently karate-chopping her shoulders and back. “Would you like a drink?” he asked.

“I can’t—I’ve got to get home,” Ingrid said, watching as David

stood and poured himself a shot of Lagavulin. "Oh sure, I leave and you break out the good stuff."

"Final countdown and I intend to get pleasantly hammered." David tapped his watch. "The B.S.D.'s from corporate arrive at Big Bernie's Discount Warehouse in thirty-seven hours, sixteen minutes."

"B.S.D.'s?"

"That's plebeian for Big Swinging Dicks."

"I get it."

David downed his drink. "But you aren't getting any, that's your problem."

Ingrid glared at him. Lately he'd been making a lot of snide comments about her lack of a personal life.

"Sorry. Couldn't resist. Don't give me that look—I'll fire you. That is, if you don't quit first. Just remember: no glowing references unless you give two weeks' notice."

"You actually think I'd put Big Bernie's on my resume?" said Ingrid.

"You'll ditch us all and go back home where you belong. I can hear the City of Angels calling."

"Oh, stop. I don't miss that smoggy corner of hell one bit." After nine months in Missoula, Ingrid had adopted the habit of insulting California. It was practically a sport in Montana. Ingrid frowned as David poured himself another shot of scotch.

"I'm worried about you," she said. "You take this management stuff too seriously."

"Once again. Ms. Murphy, you are absolutely right. But wait, wait. I need my manager's costume." He ducked into the kitchen, returned with a spangled matador's hat on his head and bowed deeply.

"As Manager of Household Goods at Big Bernie's Discount Warehouse Store Number 36 I christen you, Ingrid Murphy, Supervisor of Indispensables."

"I got that promotion two months ago," she said.

"And now, my Queen of the Charmin Twenty-Four Pack, Guardian of coffee filters, I bid you goodnight." David removed his hat. "Seriously," he said, "we have to get some work done tomorrow. I want all the aisles in Households straightened and restocked."

Ingrid curtsied. "Yes, Your Majesty."

"That's what I like to hear. See you in the morning?"

"Wouldn't miss the cheer," said Ingrid in a mocking tone. Each day before unlocking the front door, all the employees formed a circle on the sales floor and recited the store cheer. It was corporate policy, mandated by Bernie himself, and although Ingrid felt ridiculous doing it, she liked it. It reminded her of summer camp where they had all gathered and sung for the most ordinary things: putting up the flag, every terrible meal, the raccoons raiding the garbage. From the beginning, Ingrid had been an eager participant, realizing even as a child that there was only so long one could get away with such ritualized fellowship and enthusiasm. And now, knowing that Bernie had implemented the policy because a consultant had recommended it as an effective, no-cost method to reduce employee tension and turn-over (David had told her this), didn't lessen its effect: Ingrid dreaded leaving Big Bernie's and returning to the real world.

The vague panic that started whenever she knew she should already be home began to press down on Ingrid as she drove through town. She hadn't told her father she'd be going anywhere after work and hadn't called from David's either. He might have figured it out, but Neil was an alarmist, a catastrophic thinker. She should have gone straight home regardless; he'd been alone all afternoon and now half the evening too. Had he gotten himself dinner? She'd made up a plate of last night's leftovers and put it in the refrigerator but he still wasn't sure how the microwave worked. She gunned the engine through an intersection where the light had just clicked from yellow to red and a truck full of boys raising their fists barely missed broadsiding her. Her heart racing, she drove to the end of the block and pulled over, hoping the boys hadn't seen her stop. Her upper lip broke out in a fine dewy sweat. She switched on her hazard lights and the flashing yellow signal in the intersection ahead blinked in perfect synchronicity. The street glowed eerily, the wet pavement slick and bright. She turned off the defroster, then the hazard lights and there was no sound but her own breathing and heartbeat. It occurred to her then that she could stop. Just stop.

She parked the car and made herself walk at a leisurely pace

to Latte Talk About, the only cafe in downtown Missoula open at that hour. She took a corner booth meant for four people, telling herself she deserved to sit wherever she wanted. Her cappuccino arrived in an enormous cup and saucer. Alice in Fucking Wonderland, she thought, hunched over it. Most of the other patrons seemed to be university people—young, with torn jeans and long hair, goatees. The women at the next table laughed too loudly and easily, aware of their voices' timbre. A man in the opposite corner sketched, tapping his foot to Thelonious Monk floating down from the speaker mounted above his head. Ingrid felt envious of them: a slow evening with friends spent flirting and gossiping about classmates or professors, but she also felt resentful. Indulgent was the word that came to mind. She snickered to herself—who were they, all these people with time to sit around for hours talking and drinking coffee? Didn't they have responsibilities?

On the way home Ingrid rolled both front windows down in an attempt to blow the smoke out of her hair. Cigarettes and cancer in the family: you couldn't tempt fate like that and get away clean. She stuck her head out the window and drove on. The rush of damp air made her eyes water. Last winter, while driving home from radiation therapy, her mother had complained that her scalp was hot, practically burning. She rolled her window all the way down and stuck her head into the sharp February chill. When she pulled her head back in, half her hair was gone. "That's better," she said and in the rearview mirror Ingrid saw clumps of her mother's hair spiralling across the asphalt.

As she pulled into the driveway, Ingrid anticipated her father waiting anxiously inside, but he was settled deep into his recliner with another of his trivia books.

"Hi honey," he said, glancing over his reading glasses.

"Sorry I'm late. Had to help David restock. Managers from corporate are visiting the store tomorrow." She walked past him into the kitchen and scraped at a dirty plate in the sink while her face heated with shame. Why was she acting like a teenager, arming herself with excuses and lies? "What did you have for dinner?" she asked.

"Hmm? Oh, some frozen stuff."

"Did you feed Pearl?" she asked. If Pearl hadn't eaten she'd

be in the kitchen whining at Ingrid's heels, but the dog was asleep, dreaming, paddling her feet on the floor beside Angie's empty chair.

"Once, I forgot to feed the dog. Once."

She finished putting away the plates, set the dishwasher's timer so the machine would spring to life at two a.m. and sat down on the sofa.

"There are only eleven sword swallows left in the world," her father said. Ingrid looked up; he'd been reading *The Oddest Jobs*.

"They train themselves by first learning to swallow their own fist. Fight the gag reflex." Neil was happiest when dispensing information like this.

"There's a whole other world out there," he said, waving toward the field. He closed his book, took off his glasses and swung them by the earstem for a moment. "I'm going up. You'll put Pearl out to pee?"

"Don't I always?" Ingrid asked, annoyed because he had to let her know he was keeping track, checking up the way he had during Angie's illness, when he made charts and schedules for all the medications. Now he rose and walked toward her, a big man with a ruddy complexion and thick swirls of white hair. Age spots and thin, veiny skin covered his hands. Neil's long legs had grown thinner while his chest had rounded out, but at sixty-three with a stiff back, he still managed to convey the clumsy physical arrogance of a former football guard. Years ago he used to fill the house with his rage. He was a door stammer back then, fierce in his movements. His face had reddened, his hands became sweaty, his whole body a big furnace cranking heat. But what was it he'd been so angry about? She couldn't remember.

"Just didn't want you to forget," he said, bending to kiss her forehead, his shirt billowing the sweet smells of aftershave and hay. "Goodnight."

She watched him climb the stairs, listened as he settled himself on the bed where he'd watch the little television they'd brought upstairs for Angie until he fell asleep with the remote in his hand. She put the dog out and made herself some tea, standing beside the stove to catch the kettle before it whistled. Pearl scratched at the door and Ingrid let her in. The dog jumped on the couch and

before Ingrid could think about scolding her, Pearl let out a dramatic groan and curled up. It was pointless, anyway, trying to keep the dog off the couch. Neil let her up there all day while he was home. "You," she said, but her remonstrative tone only set the dog's tail in motion. She picked up her father's book and read a section about a veterinary acupuncturist. In the photo, a cockatoo with a halo of bristling silver needles perched on his hand.

She carried her mug into the kitchen and looked around. She and her father hadn't changed much there since Angie died, just rearranged the insides of a few cupboards. The bird nests were still on the windowsill; the collection of tea pot lids hung above the stove. On closer inspection, she saw they were coated with a thin film of grease and dust and she filled the sink with hot water and dish soap and began washing. The teapot lids were old, but not heirlooms. There were no heirlooms from Angie's family; there nearly wasn't a family. After Angie announced she intended to marry Neil, who was divorced, her parents disowned her. They were that Catholic. Only Ingrid's Aunt Theresa, Angie's younger sister, kept in touch. Ingrid had tried to imagine it many times, giving up your family for someone like Neil. She had once asked her mother how she could stand it, never speaking to or seeing her parents again. "They're the ones missing out," Angie said. "They'll never know this wonderful granddaughter."

She dried each lid before realizing she'd forgotten how her mother had arranged them. The pattern should have been burned into her brain; during the last nine months she'd spent hours staring at that wall, waiting for something to boil or thicken. She hung and re-hung the lids, but could not remember the way it had been. Finally giving up, she arranged them in a random pattern, hoping her father wouldn't notice. Every day another bit of Angie slipped away, irretrievable.

She turned off the overhead light in the living room and gave Pearl a perfunctory pat on the head and the dog rolled to expose her belly. Ingrid complied and rubbed the warm pink-brown skin there. This was the time of day she liked best—everything quiet and shut down for the night. There was a cricket somewhere in the house. She picked up *The Oddest Jobs* and slumped into her father's recliner, letting her feet dangle over the chair arm. Next to the veterinary acupuncturist was a photo of the massage thera-

pist rubbing down the flank of a Bengal tiger. The animal had a dazed, drooly look on its face. In the end, everything but Angie's feet were too tender to massage.

"Where did you learn this?" she'd asked. Ingrid had her mother's foot firmly in her hand. Running her thumb across the stubble on the knuckle of Angie's big toe, Ingrid wondered why her mother continued to shave the tiny patch of hair that grew there. It seemed absurd in this context but then so did other things she continued doing, like flossing and recycling. Angie sank back into the pile of pillows.

"Camp Wasewagen."

"What else did they teach there?"

"There's no blow in blow job." At that, Angie let loose a loud, hard burst of laughter. It was the laugh she was known for—the laugh that used to make men at parties and restaurants look up from the other side of a room. Angie clutched her side.

"Well," she said, recovering, "then it was money well spent." Her mother had always been the wildest of the three. One Christmas she sent her friends copies of the *Pop-Up Kama Sutra*. She was bold in the kitchen and garden, willing to try unusual combinations.

Ingrid lifted the covers to rub her mother's other foot.

"When your father sells the house, make sure you take the rocks, okay?" Angie had decorated her garden with the driftwood and rocks she collected every year at the river. There was a bleached dog skull out there too, in the fens. Pearl carried it off once and Angie had referred to her as The Cannibal ever since. Angie's last weeks were full of dog stories. Pearl's puppy stories, when she was just a Seed Pearl, the old tricks she used to do, the way she propped herself up on her elbow. "I hope you two can talk after I'm gone," Angie once said before falling asleep and it took Ingrid a minute to realize that her mother was referring to her father and not the dog.

But conversations weren't easy with Ingrid's father. She suspected he'd moved to Montana to avoid having them. He'd grown tired of Southern California years ago. He had his own plumbing business there, but the Murphys were never the kind of wealthy that people in Arcadia appreciated. Neil feuded with the neighborhood association after having been asked, repeatedly, to

please not park his truck out front. Instead of complying, he invited his employees to the house for lunch by the pool which meant there were often four or five trucks with the big purple toilet and "A Flush Beats a Full House" logo parked on the street. Once he decided to sell the business, he began looking for a place where he could get away from it all and settled on Montana, the least populated state in the country. While Ingrid was still at UCLA, her parents bought this house on twenty acres north of Missoula.

"This is the life," Ned said shortly after moving up here. "No more freeways, no smog, no air conditioning or Jehovah's Witnesses." He learned to shoot skeet, bought a tractor, got a hunting license and nearly took off his arm learning to use the new chain saw.

Now the full moon cast a glow on the room, the sofa, the dog. Ingrid thought she saw something move in the yard and it sent an electric charge down her spine. It would be just like her mother to come back in the garden. But it was only a breeze moving through the rhubarb patch, the broad curled leaves playing tricks in the moonlight.

"Goodnight, Cannibal," she whispered to the dog, stroking its head. Pearl's tail flickered but she didn't open her eyes. Ingrid turned off the hall light and washed her hands in the bathroom. The wallpaper had come loose in the corner. She refolded the towel and sighed. Re-papering the downstairs bathroom—another project. The house would show better once her father decided to sell. But for now he wanted to stay. At least until he figured things out. Figure out what? Ingrid wondered. The place was too big for one person, required too much care. What will you do when I'm gone, she'd asked him. I'll manage, he'd said. She thought of him there alone, flailing about the kitchen, forgetting to feed the dog, watching too much television and burying himself in trivia books.

"I'm not exactly sure," was the answer she gave to people who asked her when she'd return to Los Angeles. "I can't leave my father yet." *You're a good girl to help him out like this.* And then they patted her hand. She was waiting for the right time to go home and she'd know when that was.

Upstairs her father slept, snoring softly, his face furrowed,

she was sure, with worry. Searching for the remote, she tried not to wake him while picking through the folds of the Hudson Bay blanket he'd flung over himself. She hit the power button; in an instant Lauren Bacall's face shrank to a hovering blue disk then disappeared from the room.

Across the hall, Ingrid sat on her bed and pulled off her clothes. For nine months she'd been living in the guest room and it still seemed odd. On the dresser were all the familiar things Angie had displayed for visitors to admire: the Chinese snuff bottle with a dragon of carved jade, the arrowhead she had found buried in an old flower box, a large African basket, a beveled mirror framed with inlaid birch bark, a swan made of spidery hand-crocheted lace starched and twisted together. There was a photo of the three of them in a Venetian gondola: Ingrid at twelve, scowling and sweaty, her father shading his eyes and bright sunburnt nose, Angie's sleek, dark hair and radiant smile. She had been the better traveler, too.

Ingrid turned off the light and slid beneath the covers. As the flowering crabapple scraped against the window, stretched its shadow branches across the closet door, Ingrid dreamt about her rented storage space in L.A. She pulled the boxes and sheets off her tired gray sofa and it seemed huge, gleaming under the single yellow light bulb. She sat on the cold concrete floor, unwrapped her dishes and found herself surprised by each one. She hadn't remembered any of her things and the dream felt like Christmas—pure greedy joy, sitting there among stacks of boxes all for her.

The next morning she was up at seven, working out to her step aerobics video, when her father came down. He rarely got up so early and Ingrid was embarrassed to have him see her exercising like this—punching and huffing her big t-shirt. Neil's hair stood on his head in stiff meringue-like peaks; his nose and ear hair needed trimming. He bent to pet the dog.

"Did you eat?" he asked Pearl.

"Yes, I fed her already," said Ingrid. "Your vitamins are on the counter."

He poured himself a cup of coffee, scooped up his vitamins,

rummaged around for a magazine and headed for the bathroom upstairs. The phone rang. Ingrid turned off her video and answered. A woman wanted to know if Neil was there.

"He's not available just now."

"Oh, Ingrid. Hi. It's Georgia. I was just wondering if your father still needed a lift to his doctor's appointment."

Ingrid glanced at the calendar on the pantry door. The day's square was blank. "Thanks for the offer but you've done too much for us already. I'm taking Dad to his appointment."

"All right then. Let him know I called, will you?"

"Will do."

Georgia Wilkins could be unnerving. She lived on the corner and boarded over a hundred horses in stables equipped with filtered water and forced air heat. She had an indoor riding arena and property that stretched across both sides of the county road. Yoko Ono was an old friend of hers. Several of the Sable Drive residents claimed that the electric fence Georgia had put up was a hazard to dogs and children, and after spring meltdown any potholes within half a mile were attributed to the tunnel she'd gotten a permit to dig beneath the county road. She was gaining on sixty but dressed much younger and despite living on a dirt road, her shoes never showed any signs of wear. Georgia and Zane, her much older husband, had moved from Aspen and after he died she bought herself a pale yellow diesel Mercedes, the only engine on the road that knocked.

She was neighborly though, and had been waiting at the hospital when the surgeon came with news of Angie's cancer. Just the fact that she had witnessed such a private, painful moment was reason enough for Ingrid to resent her, but now she was moving in on Neil. "Who was on the phone?" Neil called down the stairs.

"Georgia. I told her I'd take you to the doctor."

"I thought you had to work. My appointment's not until nine."

"I can be a little late." Ingrid called Big Bernie's, left a message for David with the receptionist and fried two eggs for her father. She told him his breakfast was ready then stood at the sink watching the birds swarm the feeder. She couldn't sit with Neil at the table while he ate. He chewed noisily with his mouth open, working the food around.

"How come you need someone to drive you?" she asked. Neil set his fork down and swallowed the last of his orange juice.

"I'm getting my eyes checked and he's going to put those drops in."

"Oh. Well, I'm going to shower and then I'll be ready."

"I really don't see why you're taking time off work to do this. Georgia can drive me downtown."

"Oh, Daddy," Ingrid said, sidling up to her father. She planted a dry little kiss on his cheek. "Don't be silly."

At the doctor's office, Ingrid chewed a thumbnail to the quick and flipped through a whole pile of magazines, not even bothering to look at the pictures. She'd spent so much time in waiting rooms over the last year. Knowing that Neil was only having a routine eye exam didn't seem to make a difference; she still wanted to bolt. It seemed like an eternity before her father appeared in the paper-framed sunglasses.

On the way through town, Neil tapped the dashboard clock. "Nine-forty-three. You're late."

"I told you that wasn't a problem."

"I hate to see you take time off work to chauffeur me around. Georgia could have driven."

Ingrid turned toward her father. "Georgia has done too much already," she said. "You can't always depend on other people. I'm here now, but you've got to learn to do more for yourself." Sometimes Ingrid was ashamed to hear herself scolding her father but now that Angie was gone, someone had to tell him and if she didn't do it, who would? Her father sat through this silently, his eyes hidden behind the black squares of plastic. He seemed to sink into his seat and when he turned toward Ingrid she saw the sun reflected on the surface of those ridiculous glasses—a brilliant white star.

"I need more stamps," he said after a long silence. Ingrid pulled into the post office parking lot, left the engine running and told her father to sit tight. The man ahead of her in line had an artificial ear and she couldn't stop staring at it. It was pinker than the rest of his skin, like rubber doll flesh, and she wanted to touch it. She was wondering how he'd lost his ear when the sound of cheeping birds filled the lobby. The outer door was closed and she couldn't see any nests in the rafters.

She handed the clerk her father's ten dollar bill. "What is that noise?" she asked.

"We just got five hundred chicks in for the farm supply store. They're three days old and hungry."

"You can send chicks through the mail?"

"You'd be surprised what people put in the mail. Just last week one of the boys at the university got a package from his mother and what do you think she had in there? Ice cream sandwiches dripping everywhere. But then, she was from California."

In the car, Ingrid told Neil about the artificial ear, the chicks and the package of ice cream, but all he asked about was his change.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

"My eyes feel all rubbery." His lip twitched; he was still annoyed with her and she decided a stop at Latte Talk About might help smooth things over.

"What are we doing here?" he asked when she parked in front of the cafe.

"We're going to have some coffee."

"I already had my coffee."

"Then get something else."

He trudged in and lifted the oversized glasses to study the menu.

"Are these real egg creams? Made the old-fashioned way?" he asked the guy behind the espresso bar.

"Yeah, I think so."

"Because I don't want one if it isn't authentic." Neil stared suspiciously at the guy's multiple earrings.

"He'll have an egg cream," said Ingrid.

Neil frowned as Ingrid chose the only empty booth, below a stereo speaker. The music was too loud and when Ingrid picked up their drinks she asked the girl behind the counter to please turn down the volume.

Neil took a cautious first sip and turned the glass slowly in his hand, surveying it. "I haven't had one of these in years," he said.

"Is it good?"

"Just like I remember." He took another swallow, licked the

foam from his lips. When Ingrid looked up, tears spilled down his cheeks.

"Dad?"

He wiped his face with a napkin but couldn't stop crying.

"Good thing I have these on, huh?" he said, touching the sunglasses. She hadn't seen her father cry since Angie's memorial service.

"What is it?"

"This egg cream. Brings it all back to me."

"Brings what back?" She waited for her father to compose himself. He was clearly embarrassed, but made no move to leave. Ingrid patted his forearm and anticipated a story about Angie—maybe they used to hold hands in soda fountains—but her father began talking about his brother.

"Summers during high school your Uncle Tom and I used to dress up and take the train into downtown Chicago. We went around to the nice hotels. All summer long there were weddings in the banquet rooms. Fancy ones with big bands and ice sculptures. Tom and I had this game. Whenever we managed to sneak into one of those receptions we had a contest to see who could dance with the bride first. Loser bought the winner an egg cream. We were just kids but thought we were the bee's knees with our summer suits and slicked-backed hair."

"Who won?" asked Ingrid.

"Oh, I don't know. Both of us. We didn't keep a running score, but I'll tell you, I danced with a lot of beautiful women on their wedding days. It was different then. You never touched a girl unless you danced with her. The wedding dresses were made of that slippery satin and at the reception the girl hooked the train up to her wrist somehow and when you spun her there was this rustling sound." Neil finished his egg cream and wiped his face again. She could almost see him there beneath the crystal chandeliers, spinning a pretty stranger around the dance floor. She wanted to say something to her father about his story but she felt as lost as he looked. He was years away from her and everything she knew.

Ingrid cracked her window on the drive home and the rich, loamy smells of the country roads drifted into the car. Neil watched the landscape, occasionally nodding as if granting his

approval. All along the roads the lilac bushes were covered in droopy lavender blooms. Leggy stalks of lupine filled the ditches. Neil took off his glasses, lifted his face to the sun and laughed to himself as they drove by the Pagano's. Ingrid laughed too, remembering how Bill Pagano had bragged about finally shooting that porcupine with a twelve-gauge. The blast had sent quills flying through the yard and Bill's wife, who had lobbied for a live trap, drove into town and bought him a new pair of pliers. For weeks they'd seen him out there, extracting quills from tree trunks and wood fencing.

They passed a farm where horses grazed between a row of trailered sailboats on the field.

"Why haven't you gone fishing yet?" Ingrid asked her father. "It's warm enough."

"Oh, I don't know about fishing this year."

"Why not?"

"I think it's time to try something new." He paused. "Georgia's offered to give me riding lessons."

Ingrid snorted. "What? You shouldn't be on a horse. Not with your back."

"Why not?"

"What if you fell?"

"What if I fell in the boat? What if I fell down the stairs? I could spend the rest of my life worrying about falling." Ingrid turned onto Sable Road and sped past Georgia's property. "Would you slow down," Neil said, "I want to get the paper." Ingrid stopped next to the mailbox but even after unbuckling his seat belt, Neil couldn't reach the *Herald*. "Back up and get a little closer," he said. Ingrid threw the car into reverse but then pulled up too close, grazing the passenger-side mirror against the mailbox. Neil let this pass without comment, got his paper, slid off the rubber band and glanced at the front page while Ingrid parked in the driveway.

She got out of the car, rushed past her father and shut the front door on Pearl, who'd rushed over to greet them. Upstairs, in the guestroom, she changed into her work clothes and brushed her hair with furious strokes.

When she came downstairs, Pearl was on the couch, next to

Neil. He looked up from the newspaper spread across his lap and the dog's head.

"What's with you?" he said.

"You just don't see."

"According to Dr. Stang, my vision is fine, quite good, actually for a man my age."

"That's not what I mean and you know it."

"Then why don't you tell me what you do mean."

"Don't you see how Georgia is horning in on you?"

Neil held up his hand. "Stop right there. Georgia is a good neighbor and she's becoming a good friend. If anyone's horning in around here, it's you."

"Me?" Blood rushed to Ingrid's face. Pearl slid out from under the newspaper and jumped into Angie's chair.

"The last thing I want is my daughter fussing over me like I'm some frail old man who doesn't know his ass from a hole in the ground."

"That's not what I think."

"Listen to yourself some time." He folded up his paper. "I'm happy to help you out for as long as you need, but I've got my own life to live. Both of us do."

"Help me out? Sure is nice to know I'm appreciated around here." She reeled into the hallway and yanked her purse from the coat tree.

"Ingrid," her father called.

"I'm late," she said and slammed the door behind her.

When Ingrid arrived at work, Holly was on a step stool, reorganizing the Ecco kitchen utensils. They had both been hired as inventory temps, but now Ingrid was Holly's supervisor.

"Why are you doing this?" Ingrid asked. Holly blushed deeply, flipped the tail of her thick braid into her mouth and sucked on it. Ingrid fought the urge to reach over and pull the hair out of the girl's mouth.

"David asked me to. He said you were going to be late and that I should go ahead and get started," she trailed off.

"I'll finish up here. Go see if he needs you for something else." Holly turned, rushed off and the wet end of her braid left damp marks as it slapped the back of her thin t-shirt.

Ingrid pulled down all the vegetable peelers and re-hung them

next to the graters. Much more logical than the way Holly had them. She was starting on the wine openers when a customer marched over.

"I've been all over this damn store," the woman said. "Why aren't these with the coffee makers?" she asked, holding up a replacement carafe. Ingrid had no good answer for her. Convenience was the concept behind Indispensables. It had begun with just one aisle of paper products, light bulbs, film and batteries. Despite the fact most customers were hostile about the whole idea, Indispensables had been expanded and now included all the Ecco kitchen gadgets as well as masking, packing and scotch tape, Rubbermaid trash cans, coffee-maker filters and replacement carafes, tea kettles shaped like pigs, cows, cardinals and smiling tomatoes. The woman waited for Ingrid to respond.

"It's considered an Indispensable," she answered meekly.

"You need a goddamn map to shop at this place."

"Actually, there is a map," Ingrid said. "The greeter up front can give you one." The woman left in a huff. Ingrid returned to her bottle openers, but when David came over to see how things were going, she couldn't hold back her tears.

"Let's go talk," he said. Ingrid followed him through Households, ducking her head as she passed Holly.

"Now what's the matter with you?" David asked. They were sitting on a pallet of canned green beans in the warehouse. He shook a Camel from his pack.

"Me too," Ingrid sniffed. David lit two cigarettes and handed her one.

"Well," he said, exhaling a ribbon of smoke.

"It's this woman, Georgia. She's after my father."

"The neighbor with the horses?"

"Yeah, her."

"So, what's wrong with that?"

"I can't stand her. She's pushy and I don't trust her. I can't figure out what she wants from my father."

"I thought she was rich."

"She is."

"So she's not after his money." Ingrid shook her head and blew her nose. "I'm sure Neil can hold his own with the horsey set."

"Oh, please. He's a mess, David. This morning he cried over an egg cream."

"His wife died four months ago. He's supposed to cry." David dropped his cigarette and stepped on it. "So are you," he added. Ingrid let the tip of her cigarette melt a hole through the shrink-wrap on a case of beans. An acrid wisp of black smoke rose before her. "You know," said David, "you and Lewis are a lot alike."

"How's that?" She couldn't imagine Lewis being any less like her.

"You both have that only-child syndrome. You think your parents need you. But it sounds to me like Neil's getting on with his life. Maybe you're the one with the problem."

Ingrid's indignation flared. Why was she letting him talk to her like this? She burned another hole in the plastic.

"Stop that," David said, grabbing her cigarette. "What are you going to do with yourself?" he asked. "Spend the rest of your life working at Big Bernie's and fretting over your father?"

"That's not exactly what I had planned." But there was no plan. She could go back to L.A., but for what? She and Brad were finished. It was unlikely Wall Flowers would hire her back. She'd screwed up the last job they'd sent her on—a Brentwood nightmare of a bathroom. Columns and a domed ceiling over the shower. The client had special-ordered William Morris wallpaper from Liberty of London and Ingrid ruined three rolls of it on the ceiling alone. If she returned to L.A. she'd have to start her life all over. Just the thought of it was daunting.

The storewide intercom crackled. "Customer service to Indispensables. Customer Service to Indispensables." Ingrid began to hoist herself up, but David pulled her back.

"Let someone else take care of it," he said.

"Indispensables," Ingrid snorted. "Such a stupid department."

"I know. There's already been talk about eliminating it entirely. The customers don't seem to like it."

"I could have told you that," Ingrid said. "Thanks for the cigarette. And the pep talk." She stood to go.

"Wait a sec. You've got smudges." David licked his thumb, wiped it beneath Ingrid's eyes and gave her an appraising glance.

"So, Mr. Manager, am I excused now?"

David gave her a little shove. "Go forth and multiply," he said.
"Do as I say, not as I do—is that it?"
"Funny, Ingrid. Sure will miss you around here."

When Ingrid got home, Pearl wasn't in the house. Neither was Neil, but his car was in the garage and he'd left a note on the kitchen counter: Soup in the crock pot. Ingrid lifted the lid and held her face over the steam. Angie's lentil soup recipe. Had he made it himself or defrosted a batch from the freezer? She checked the kitchen trash can for evidence, but found it empty. She got a spoon from the drawer and tasted the soup. A little heavy on the black pepper, definitely not a batch of Angie's. Ingrid stood there, eating out of the crock and thought about starting her own wallpapering business. She'd never enjoyed working for those catty decorators at the store anyway. She already had her own equipment. All she really needed were some business cards. It was something to consider, anyway.

An hour later, Neil still hadn't come in. Ingrid walked out to the garden. They had waited until the snow melted before scattering Angie's ashes there and now Ingrid knelt to look for traces of them. She couldn't find one tiny bone chip, but the dahlias were coming up. An ant dragged a beetle carcass, easily ten times its own size, into a hole. Pearl appeared at Ingrid's side, panting. "Where's Dad?" she asked the dog that took off running. Ingrid followed Pearl through the wild grasses and flowers that hadn't yet opened. The grasshoppers had recently hatched. Hundreds of them popped across her shoes. One landed on her hand. No bigger than a sesame seed but already perfectly formed. Ahead, in the center of the bowl-shaped field, Pearl looked almost luminous. The dog ran on, occasionally stopping to wait for Ingrid. Above, the crows circled hysterically, chasing a hawk.

Crossing the road, Ingrid saw that it was her father riding the Appaloosa through Georgia's pasture. Neil was a bit wobbly in the saddle but kept his head up. He must have seen her because he waved then. Ingrid waved too. But what do we mean, she wondered. Hello or goodbye?